

What is claimed is:

1. A vehicle sharing system for sharing one or more vehicles from a fleet of vehicles among one or more users, the vehicle allocation system comprising:

5 a plurality of ports, including first and second ports at geographically remote locations relative to each other, each port having a user interface terminal for receiving a request for a vehicle from the fleet, each port having a vehicle search group VSG in which one or more vehicles from the fleet may be located at any given time;

10 a computer system coupled for communication with the user interface terminal at each port and programmed for processing a user request received at a first port and, in response thereto, for selecting a vehicle from the VSG of the first port, if a suitable vehicle is present in the VSG of the first port, and for selecting a vehicle from the VSG of the second port, if a suitable vehicle is not present in the VSG of the first port; and

15 means for relocating the selected vehicle to the first port, if the vehicle selected is in the VSG of the second port.

2. A system as recited in claim 1, wherein each port includes a vehicle parking facility at which one or more vehicles may be parked at any given time and the VSG of a given port includes said parking facility at the port.

20 3. A system as recited in claim 1, wherein the VSG of a given port further includes vehicles due to arrive at the port within a preset time period.

25 4. A system as recited in claim 1, wherein at least some of the vehicles in the fleet are provided with tow hitch receptacles for connecting to one end of a tow bar and said means for relocating comprises a tow bar for connecting two vehicles together at said second port such that both vehicles may be transported to the first port by a single driver.

5. A system as recited in claim 1, wherein at least some of the vehicles in the fleet are provided with a carrier hitch receptacle and said means for relocating comprises a carrier bracket connectable to the said carrier hitch receptacle of one vehicle, for carrying a second vehicle.

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6. A system as recited in claim 5, wherein said carrier bracket comprises a cycle carrier bracket for carrying a cycle and said second vehicle comprises a cycle.

10. A system as recited in claim 1, further comprising a port attendant display device for displaying a relocation message to an attendant of the second port, wherein said computer system is programmed to control said display device to display a message to relocate a vehicle to the first port, if a suitable vehicle is not present in the VSG of the first port.

15. 8. A method for sharing one or more vehicles from a fleet of vehicles among one or more users, the method comprising:

providing a user interface terminal at a plurality of ports, including first and second ports at geographically remote locations relative to each other;

receiving a request for a vehicle from the fleet from a user at an interface terminal of a first port;

20 defining a vehicle search group VSG for the first port, in which one or more vehicles from the fleet may be located at any given time, and a second vehicle search group VSG for the second port, in which one or more vehicles from the fleet may be located at any given time;

selecting a vehicle from the VSG of the first port, if a suitable vehicle is present in the VSG of the first port, and selecting a vehicle from the VSG of the second port, if a suitable vehicle is not present in the VSG of the first port; and

25 relocating the selected vehicle to the first port, if the vehicle is selected from the VSG of the second port.

9. A method as recited in claim 8, wherein each port includes a vehicle parking facility at which one or more vehicles may be parked at any given time and the VSG of a given port includes said parking facility at the port.

5 10. A method as recited in claim 8, wherein the VSG of a given port further includes vehicles due to arrive at the port within a preset time period.

10 11. A method as recited in claim 8, wherein at least some of the vehicles in the fleet are provided with tow hitch receptacles and wherein said step of relocating the selected vehicle comprises:

connecting one end of a tow bar to a trailer hitch of a first vehicle and a second end of the tow bar to a trailer hitch of a second vehicle; and

towing the second vehicle with the first vehicle to the first port.

15 12. A method as recited in claim 8, wherein at least some of the vehicles in the fleet are provided with a carrier hitch receptacle and said step of relocating comprises:

connecting a carrier bracket to the said carrier hitch receptacle of a first vehicle; and carrying a second vehicle on the carrier bracket to the first port.

20 13. A method as recited in claim 8, further comprising displaying a relocation message to an attendant of the second port, if a suitable vehicle is not present in the VSG of the first port.

25 14. A method as recited in claim 8, wherein said VSG of said first port is different than the VSG of said second port.

15. A vehicle sharing system for sharing one or more vehicles from a fleet of vehicles among one or more users, the vehicle allocation system comprising:

a plurality of ports, including first and second ports at geographically remote locations relative to each other, each port having search depth VSG in which one or more available vehicles from the fleet may be located at any given time for possible allocation to a user;

5 a computer system programmed to determine the number of available vehicles in the VSG of the first port and, based on the number of available vehicles, to determine whether additional vehicles should be relocated to the VSG of the first port;

means for relocating one or more vehicles from the second port to the first port, upon a determination that additional vehicles should be relocated to the first port.

10 15. A system as recited in claim 15, wherein each port includes a vehicle parking facility at which one or more vehicles may be parked at any given time and the VSG of a given port includes said parking facility at the port.

15. A system as recited in claim 15, wherein the VSG of a given port further includes vehicles due to arrive at the port within a preset time period.

20 25. A system as recited in claim 15, wherein at least some of the vehicles in the fleet are provided with tow hitch receptacles for connecting to one end of a tow bar and said means for relocating comprises a tow bar for connecting two vehicles together at said second port such that both vehicles may be transported to the first port by a single driver.

19. A system as recited in claim 15, wherein at least some of the vehicles in the fleet are provided with a carrier hitch receptacle and said means for relocating comprises a carrier bracket connectable to the said carrier hitch receptacle of one vehicle, for carrying a second vehicle.

20. A system as recited in claim 15, further comprising a port attendant display device for displaying a relocation message to an attendant of the second port, wherein said computer system is programmed to control said display device to display a message to relocate a vehicle to the first port, if a suitable vehicle is not present in the VSG of the first port.

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21. A method for sharing one or more vehicles from a fleet of vehicles among one or more users, the method comprising:

providing a plurality of ports, including first and second ports at geographically remote locations relative to each other;

10 defining a vehicle search group VSG for the first port, in which one or more vehicles from the fleet may be located at any given time, and a second vehicle search group VSG for the second port, in which one or more vehicles from the fleet may be located at any given time;

15 determining the number of available vehicles in the VSG of the first port and, based on the number of available vehicles, determining whether additional vehicles should be relocated to the VSG of the first port;

9 relocating one or more vehicles from the second port to the first port, upon a determination that additional vehicles should be relocated to the first port.

20 22. A method as recited in claim 21, wherein said step of determining the number of available vehicles in the VSG of the first port comprises detecting the location of each vehicle in the fleet and determining the number of vehicles within a designated area.

25 23. A method as recited in claim 22, wherein said step of determining whether additional vehicles should be relocated comprises determining whether the detected number of vehicles is below a preset value.

24. A method as recited in claim 21, wherein said step of determining whether additional vehicles should be relocated comprises determining whether the number of available vehicles in the VSG of the first port is below a preset value.

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25. A method as recited in claim 21, wherein at least some of the vehicles in the fleet are provided with tow hitch receptacles and wherein said step of relocating the selected vehicle comprises:

5 connecting one end of a tow bar to a trailer hitch of a first vehicle and a second end of the tow bar to a trailer hitch of a second vehicle; and
towing the second vehicle with the first vehicle to the first port.

26. A method as recited in claim 21, wherein at least some of the vehicles in the fleet are provided with a carrier hitch receptacle and said step of relocating comprises:

10 connecting a carrier bracket to the said carrier hitch receptacle of a first vehicle; and carrying a second vehicle on the carrier bracket to the first port.